"WHOOPS I AM A LADY ON THE INTERNET": Digital Feminist Counter-Publics

Cluster Editors

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("Internet Lady" by Kate Beaton, harkavagrant.com/index.php?id=103)

May 2015, when we organized the panel upon which this essay cluster is based, now seems like a different world—a world in which it still needed to be said that the Internet is a dangerous place for women, but one in which the public conversations *about* that gendered danger led us to feel hopeful. We wrote, at the time, of *Al Jazeera* columnist Sarah Kendzior, who publicly addressed the "rape threats and constant harassment" she has received online from "people who describe themselves as leftists or communists, and apparently want to rape their way to revolution" (Kendzior 2014). These days, however, Kendzior has been moved to educate her readers about anti-fascist resistance strategies. In 2015, we discussed the open misogyny of the online gaming community, before the people behind GamerGate had become the primary platform of the alt-right (Bernstein 2015). Now, more than two years later, the truism that the Internet is a dangerous place for women is so pat-

ently obvious as to be banal, yet its urgency as a tool of organization for politicized counterpublics is anything but.

The essays and interviews gathered here are, due to the speed of both Internet discourse and contemporary politics, instantly dated. And yet, the concerns they voice—about the Internet as a series of overlapping publics that women, especially women of colour, build and negotiate in complex, fraught, sometimes empowering and sometimes dangerous ways—are as timely as ever. In fact, narratives of negotiating these spaces have become a genre unto themselves, appearing, for example, in both Lindy West's *Shrill: Notes From a Loud Woman* (2016) and Scaachi Koul's *One Day We'll All Be Dead and None Of This Will Matter* (2017). These essays, a personal accounting of the abuse these prominent public intellectuals have endured and a justification of why they nevertheless continue to write publicly, position rape threats as the price women pay for, as Erin Wunker writes in her contribution in this issue, "being a woman who writes about feminism and social justice in public forums." This genre, into which we might add Wunker's own "Sweating in Public: Some Thoughts About Writing on the Internet While Being a Woman," reminds us that rape culture is a deliberate means of keeping women out of the public sphere, of denying women access to public speech.

One of the urgent questions of these essays and interviews became: what kinds of digital counterpublics can women find, or produce, online, in an environment that is deliberately and fundamentally violent to us? In our use of the term *counterpublic* we are of course indebted to Michael Warner (2005), who defines the counterpublic as a politicized public marked by both its "subordinate status" and its oppositionality to a dominant "cultural horizon" (119). The essays and interviews gathered here attend both to the spaces women build, like *GUTS Magazine*, and the ones we learn to negotiate.

Erin Wunker's essay opens this cluster with a consideration of the university as a liminal space between the public and the private, drawing on a range of examples: her own purposefully non-anonymous writing on the academic blog *Hook & Eye*; the humanities classroom as a space that is at once highly intimate and constantly available to public critique; and the campus dorm room as at once private home and public signifier, as explored in Emma Sulkowicz's performance piece *Carry That Weight* (2014-2015). The university is somehow intensely subject to public scrutiny and, yet, as the need for a blog like *Hook & Eye* reminds us, always inadequately public when it comes to how we circulate our ideas. Traditional scholarly publication venues, even as (like this journal) they move toward Open Access, often continue to prohibitively exclude the kinds of affectively charged and embodied personal speech that characterizes women's experience and navigation of the university as an institution.

As a counterpoint to Wunker's consideration of academic publics, cluster co-editor Hannah McGregor's interview with activist and public intellectual Virgie Tovar included in this cluster focuses on the activism that happens beyond the borders of the university, and the radical online work women can do without the restrictions of the university. "I was always unwilling to do the work of showing that every single thought I have has a genealogy that begins with white masculinity," Tovar explains. "And there's just no way to succeed in the academy if you're not willing to do that. So I decided we're not compatible." Tovar's activist work instead explores the possibilities for radical thought built into the Internet, from public accessibility (which she defines as part of her feminist praxis) to the visuality of platforms like Instagram that are being strategically used for the organizing of fat, queer, and Black, Indigenous, people of colour femmes.

It is the radical possibilities of the Internet that co-editor Marcelle Kosman's interview with members of the *GUTS Magazine* editorial collective addresses, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities of applying anti-oppressive intersectional feminism to a digital publishing business model. Focusing on the practical rather than the theoretical dimensions of digital feminist counterpublics, they emphasize how their feminist praxis rejects hierarchical relationships between editors and authors as well as universalizing notions of what constitutes feminist activism: "just as forms of oppression are not uniform, forms of feminism are not uniform, so *GUTS* strives for intersectional feminisms that can speak to one another."

In "The Difference a Gender Makes," self-identified "geek, artist and author" Marceline Cook (mjcook.org) writes of her own experiences as a trans woman online. Her contribution considers not only how our

gender presentation influences the ways others interact with us, but also how profoundly *feminine* gender informs women's behaviour online. Drawing on her personal experience as an intellectual, activist, and artist whose career requires her online presence, she demonstrates that, in spite of the opportunities the Internet affords, it remains far from a safe space for women.

In "The Digitization of Neurodiversity: Real Cyborgs and Virtual Bodies," contributor Isla Ng explores digital identity politics through the lens of disability studies. The article brings disability studies and neurodiversity into the framework of Donna Haraway's (2000 [1984]) "A Cyborg Manifesto," refusing the mainstream gendering of neurodiversity as masculine within the supposedly disembodied and abstract realm of the Internet. As a case study, she focuses on Melissa Broder's Twitter account @SoSadToday in order to "advocate for the centering of disability studies within digital feminist discourse both because the experiences of people with disabilities matter and deserve far more support and attention than they currently receive, and because disability theory helps us to break past the dichotomous gendered boundaries within the politics of digital technology. This means rejecting the notion that women of color and/or with disabilities have to compromise the realism of their bodies and identities when entering digital spaces." By centring disability in her own analysis, Ng models some of the possibilities that accompany just such an intervention into digital feminist discourse.

This thematic cluster concludes with co-editor Clare Mulcahy's interview with writer, activist, and organizer Alicia Garza about Black Lives Matter (of which she was a co-founder) and the relationship between traditional and digital activism. Garza focuses on the Internet's capacity to galvanize and radicalize those who are new to activism, alongside its limitations for long-term activism due to the ephemerality of online relationships. Even more pressingly, she recognizes that the state also actively polices #BLM and other activists through social media. "Even when social movements are using technology and the Internet specifically to further our aims," she points out, "it's also being used to surveil what activists are doing…to disrupt and criminalize activity that is critical of the state," Critiques of the Internet as an organizing tool are both necessary, emphasizing the need for localized activism and the dangers of state surveillance, and insufficient, as any rejection of the Internet becomes a rejection of the urgent forms of organization it has facilitated.

Through the multiple frames of gender, sexuality, race, and disability, these essays and interviews contemplate what it means to be "a lady on the Internet" at a moment when this work is at once necessary and more dangerous than ever.

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